CHAPTER THREE

BABU

"Servitude is the soul blinded. Can you picture to yourself a man voluntarily blind? This terrible thing exists. There are willing slaves. A smile in irons! Can anything be more hideous? He who is not free is not a man; he who is not free has no sight; no knowledge^ no discernment^ no growth, no comprehension, no will, no faith, no love"

VICTOR HUGO

THE TITLE OF THIS CHAPTER may be misleading, for the word *babu* has a variety of meanings. It generally evokes hoary chestnuts such as are bandied about the European clubs concerning *babu English.* The "Bengali Babu[55] belongs to the same category as the stage curate and the comedian's mother-in-law. The word seems originally to have been used of the old aristocracy of Bengal. It came to have a meaning equivalent to the eighteenth-century "masher" or dandy. It was also used as an honorific title for petty rajahs, i.e. the Babu of .

Bengal followed Surat and Madras as the main centre of Indian commerce and it produced wealthy merchants, who were also called "Babu." When the East India Company came upon the scene these "Babus" became compra-dores and middlemen. Gradually the word came to lose its dignity and was applied to the clerks of the Company, coming to signify "pen-pusher." Perhaps we may be allowed to use the word also in the sense that Julien Benda uses the word "clerk," a literate, an intellectual.

As elsewhere, so in India, the middle class is by no means homogeneous; the history of the word *babu* is illuminating.